1500 BLOCK NORTH SEVENTEENTH STREET (HOUSES)
West side
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HABS PA-6675
PA,51-PHILA,744-

PHOTOGRAPHS

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

1500 BLOCK, N. SEVENTEENTH STREET

HABS No. PA–6675

LOCATION: 1500 block, N. Seventeenth Street, west side between Oxford and Jefferson Streets, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

SIGNIFICANCE:

The dwellings in the 1500 block of N. Seventeenth Street stand among the most lavish in North Philadelphia. Developed by streetcar barons Peter A. B. Widener and William L. Elkins and designed by Willis G. Hale the eccentric architect for the city's *nouveaux riches*, these semi-detached houses are larger and considerably freer in their exterior detailing than most other urban residences in the area. Despite not having high profile siting along N. Broad Street or any of the premier east-west avenues extending to Fairmount Park, their robust street presence was carefully thought-out and constructed. The twin residences were clearly meant for and ultimately inhabited (if only for a few decades) by families comprising the upper tier of the expanding post-Civil War bourgeoisie who settled in the area. Hale's eclectic exterior organization for the houses is representative of the high-Victorian fantasy common in Philadelphia buildings during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

DESCRIPTION:

These thirteen semi-detached dwellings (Nos. 1500–1524) are arranged in pairs with the exception of the northernmost, No. 1524, which stands alone. Two different façade types are alternately used for the six twins and a compatible, though distinct, design was employed on No. 1524. Like most North Philadelphia dwellings, these thirteen are loosely divided into front and rear sections, however, not with the conventional ell. As they are freestanding pairs, the necessity of reducing usable square footage in an effort to provide better natural lighting and ventilation with the ell is eliminated. The front sections all contain two stories with a full third floor contained under mansard roof. The rear sections—visually separated from the front section by a setback in the wall at the central staircase—are also a full three stories; no roof extends above their simple cornices. A period insurance survey refers to the sections as the "main building" and the "back building." The dwellings are of brick with stone foundations and extensive stone trim. Window sash representative of what was probably used in all the units as originally constructed is visible in No. 1520. Carved wooden window surrounds contain either one-over-one double hung sash or double hung windows with decorative muntin patterns in the upper sash and single-pane lower sash. The arched windows contained an upper half-circle window with a single fixed pane below as evidenced on the first floor of No. 1502. The front doors were contained within carved surrounds similar to those framing the windows.

The façade elevations are articulated in full Victorian eclectic splendor. Nos. 1504–1506, 1512–1514, 1520–1522 comprise the first façade type. Only one major deviation from the identical norm is visible—in Nos. 1520–1522 an open porch present in the other two twins

at the second floor is enclosed, probably from the time of the initial construction. Rusticated sandstone extends from the foundation up to the first-floor sill line. The first and second stories are largely of brick with windows and doors aligned in two bays—though the bay organization is extremely suppressed for the entire block. The mansard roof at the third story is broken into two stages and sheathed in decorative slates. Different aspects of the façade reinforce both the unified composition conception for the pairs as well as the presence of two completely separate residences within the envelope. Unifying aspects include an overall symmetrical arrangement of parts, the presence of the front doors in a recess under one massive stone arch, and the pairing of central windows both at the second story, but more explicitly at the attic story. Conversely, in recessing the central portion of the mansard roof, the architect essentially created two "towers"—one each for the two dwellings—that contain a brick and stone dormer topped by a pyramidal roof. The stone window lintels are individually expressed at each level: rusticated segmental arches for the first floor, rusticated semicircular arches for the second floor, and a single slab of smooth stone in the attic dormer. The most ebullient architectural ornament occurs at the second floor where the window sills are supported by brick corbels, stone "ropes" extend horizontally across the building in two bands, and the facades literally "drip" with corbelled brick decorative elements.

The pairs including Nos. 1500–1502, 1508–1510, and 1516–1518 are identically articulated on the façade. With the exception of the massive stone arch containing the recessed entries—part of a stone arcade that springs from side-to-side around the first floor and contained under a stepped Flemish-type gable—these pairs are more clearly composed as two residences. A sandstone foundation wall made up of large slabs terminates at the sill line of the first floor. The first and second stories are of brick with stone trim and a mansard roof on the third floor is present behind the two bold brick crow-step gables, one for each dwelling. The first floor extends out from the wall plain of the upper floors. A round-headed window faces front with a canted one at the buildings' corners. The stone arcade turns from the lateral wall at the corner, thus necessitating a thin support post in front of this window. The second- and third-floor windows are aligned internally, rather than as a single, unified group as with the other façade type. Two second-story windows are separated by a blank stone recess; three third-story windows—one rectangular central flanked by two square—correspond with the second story below. Stone is used for both window lintels and sills and the facades are further embellished with brick corbels at each step in the attic story and entry gables.

No. 1524, the only unpaired unit in the row, in plan is identical to the others and probably always contained a blank wall on its north side. Despite the provisions for possible construction abutting the edifice, its street face was articulated as an individual, freestanding unit. The brownstone and brick façade clearly relates the dwelling to the pairs to the south. Emphasis at the southeast corner—a canted window at the second floor and corner dormer in the third-floor mansard—draws attention away from its blank northern side and reinforces the dwellings association with its paired neighbors below.

A fire insurance policy for No. 1500 N. Sixteenth Street, the corner unit, provides information related to the layout, function, and appointment of the interior rooms.[1] Despite being a corner unit, the only differentiation between this house and the others is that the rear of the house is extended slightly and a two-story turret is present at the building's rear corner facing Jefferson Street. On account of the enlargement's modest size, it can be inferred that the description of No. 1500's interior is representative or closely related to the other dwellings.

While the exteriors are quite unique in their form and articulation when compared with other North Philadelphia houses, the sketch plan of the interior included in the survey reveals a standard urban, side passage arrangement of rooms. Front and back parlors opened onto the side passage which terminated in the middle of the house with three steps up to a landing providing access to the dining room and the stairs to the second floor. A dining room, pantry, and kitchen occupied the rear portion of the first floor; a second staircase was present for service circulation. On the second floor, the main building contained two rooms—presumably bedchambers—with a sitting room and smoking room in the back building. The third floor was "divided same as [the] second story" at the front and contained a bathroom and storeroom at the rear. This bathroom and the "bath house" overhang on the second floor in the main building's south wall both contained a water closet, marble-top washstand, and a "basin;" the third floor bathroom also contained a copper tub piped for hot and cold water. A "toilet room" occupied space on the first floor under the main stairs. The back building's basement area contained a billiard room and a laundry.

Though the arrangement of rooms on the three floors along a side passage was common throughout all tiers of urban housing, 1500 N. Seventeenth Street and its immediate neighbors are graciously sized; as evidenced by the number and specific functions of the rooms they easily served the various needs of Victorian daily life. The inclusion of semi-public spaces—the family sitting room and the patriarch's smoking room—on the second floor was a common feature of higher status late-nineteenth-century urban housing in general, not just for attached houses with restrictive footprints. One peculiarity about No. 1500's room function remains. From the plan and description of the interior it seems that the only means of access for the basement billiard room from the house's interior was the service stair in the kitchen, though an extant exterior door opening onto Jefferson Street—not mentioned in the survey—may have provided a more socially acceptable entrance for the space.

The 1500 block of N. Seventeenth Street currently stands in varying degrees of upkeep and/or deterioration. Overall, the structures appear to maintain their integrity, however, a number of them are abandoned and their windows are boarded (Nos. 1506, 1514, 1518, 1522, and 1524). The ones that remain inhabited—including the funeral home in No. 1500—have had various small-scale changes made on their exteriors, generally with replacement windows, doors, and awnings. The condition of the interiors is not known.

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[1]Samuel Hillman, Franklin Fire Insurance, policy No. 72198, 1500 N. Seventeenth Street, 23 May 1894.

HISTORY:

NORTH PHILADELPHIA

For the first 150 years, the physical expansion of Philadelphia remained intricately tied to the Delaware River. The neatly gridded plan laid-out by William Penn late in 1682 was originally composed of twenty-two blocks extending between the Delaware and the Schuylkill rivers. Development in the colonial city occurred largely in the blocks east of the center square, organically spilling over north (Northern Liberties) and south (Southwark) of the grid along the Delaware long before driving west towards Schuylkill. By the first decades of the nineteenth century, commercial establishments continued their march further west along Market Street and the Center Square became home to the city's first pumping station—an impressive structure designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe. By the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century, well-heeled Philadelphians looked westward for the formation of their elite enclaves on and around Rittenhouse Square and even across the Schuylkill. If not fully developed—an action that would take many decades—the remainder of Penn's city was at least staked-out.

In the eighteenth century, the areas northwest of Northern Liberties and north along the Schuylkill evolved as the location of wealthy Philadelphians' country estates and a variety of more modest farmsteads. Nearly every prominent family in the city owned both a spacious townhouse, as well as an expansive, Georgian-plan rural retreat offering respite from the summer heat and the seasonal epidemics that plagued the dense city. These residences and the neighboring working farms were casually positioned in the landscape and tied together by a tangle of country roads. Their form and direction was based more on property divisions and topography than the rational linearity of the urban grid to the south. Reflections printed in 1883 nostalgically characterized this early landscape: "the whole neighborhood was then a pretty piece of country, upon which the country-seats of noted Philadelphians stood."[2] While the dominant landscape for well over a century, this bucolic mix of farms, country houses, and rural lanes began to change in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

In 1843, the irregularly platted blocks of the crossroads village of Francisville—turned 45° to the city grid and aligned with the Ridge Road—existed as the northernmost developed blocks west of Broad Street. Most higher density development north of the city remained east of Broad in the Spring Garden District.[3] West of Broad, the most significant expansion in the antebellum period was a variety of institutions that reflected the social reform and education fervor gripping the entire country, but particularly pronounced in Philadelphia.

Within the northern reaches of the Spring Garden District, the groundbreaking and influential Eastern State Penitentiary fronted Coates Street (Fairmount Avenue) and had its perimeter wall and initial cells completed by 1829.[4] A few blocks to the north, within Penn

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[2]"Improvements in the Northwestern Part of the City—Professor Wagner's Recollections—The Progress of Time," *Public Ledger and Daily Transcript* 18 Aug. 1883, from Scrapbooks of the Wagner Free Institute of Science, 1847–1980, box 8, vol. 3.

[3]Richard Webster, *Philadelphia Preserved: Catalog of the Historic American Buildings Survey* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976) 287.

[4]J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia, 1609–1884*, vol. III (Philadelphia: L. H. Everts & Co., 1884) 1835.

Township, the original Girard College orphans' school buildings, designed by Thomas U. Walter, rose on capacious grounds beginning 1833 with construction continuing through the end of 1847.[5] Concurrent with this building campaign, Girard Avenue became an important transportation corridor and fashionable thoroughfare, centered on an increasingly German-dominated population.[6] Certainly, the location of Girard College enhanced the development potential of the avenue. However, the fact that Girard was half-as-much-more broad than nearby parallel streets it could accommodate both the expanding horse car lines, as well as other traffic, running between Broad Street and the Schuylkill River.[7] A few blocks east of Girard College on this premier avenue, the steeple of the Green Hill Presbyterian Church, constructed in 1847–1848 on plans by John Notman, pierced the skyline. Directly south across Girard Avenue, St. Joseph's Hospital was installed in a double house purchased by the Sisters of St. Joseph on June 18, 1849.[8] The hospital added a number of more substantial buildings over fifteen years beginning in 1852.[9]

While this institutional expansion was significant, it did not greatly change the area's rural atmosphere. However, the massive population explosion in antebellum Philadelphia, with over half a million residents by 1860, pushed the necessity for rational planning of the city's inevitable and imminent physical expansion. In the 1840s, the grid of Penn's city was, on paper, extended northward over the houses, farms, institutions, and irregular lanes up to the borders of Roxborough and Germantown.[10] The 1854 Act of Consolidation brought a number of adjacent, but municipally independent, townships under the jurisdiction of the City of Philadelphia. The rationale for this move was simple:

> the city and contiguous territory had practically become one city, with a common future and common wants, and their adequate development was crippled by the multiplicity and jealousy of the many existing governing bodies acting independently of one each other.[11]

With political uniformity completed, the consolidated government worked to standardize the organization of street names and numbering, utilizing a highly logical system that was first employed in Penn's city in 1853 and extended throughout the consolidated city in 1858.[12] The restructuring of the city politic and street grid established, expansion northward could

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[5]The Penn District was "erected out of Penn Township" by an Act of Assembly on February 26, 1844. The district was enlarged by Act of Assembly on February 17, 1847 and became the 20th Ward under the Act of Consolidation on February 2, 1854.

[6]George E. Thomas, "National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, Girard Avenue Historic District," Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 13 May 1985, item 8.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Scharf, vol. II, 1679.

[9]Ibid.

[10]*Plan of the District and Township of Penn, Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Fox & Haines, 1847).

[11]Edward P. Allinson, *Philadelphia 1681–1887: A History of Municipal Development* (Philadelphia: Allen, Lane & Scott, Publishers, 1887) 140–141.

[12]Russell F. Weigley, "The Border City in Civil War, 1854–1865," *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History*, ed. Russell F. Weigley (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982) 375.

commence unabated, however it did not come to fruition until the decades after the Civil War, at a pace that few could have imagined in 1860.

Historically, wealthy and many middling Philadelphians largely remained quartered in center city. Some higher density row-type housing did go up north of Penn's city. Until early in the 1870s, however, most of this construction west of Broad terminated with Girard Avenue. In the 1870s, horsecar ("streetcar") extensions and road surface improvements made blocks north of Girard Avenue attractive to upper-class Philadelphians. From that location, the city's political and economic powerbrokers resided within easy reach, by horsecar or private coach, of the center city commercial district.

Commodious row and single-family houses intended for upper-class owners and tenants rapidly lined the streets of North Philadelphia, particularly along Broad Street. The men who made ostentatious statements of their wealth through the houses they constructed failed to penetrate the social and power circles of Philadelphia's old and established blue-blood families. The wealthy of the North Broad Street area were the *nouveaux riches* who made their fortunes in ways that differed from the practices of Philadelphia's staid gentry. In the 1870s and 1880s, Philadelphia's patrician families maintained their residences in Rittenhouse Square or in suburban Chestnut Hill.[13]

After 1880, the pace of expansion became frantic. Row housing for all tiers of the social hierarchy were going up on first-rate, second-rate, and tertiary streets. The move from horsecars to cable and electric streetcar lines made the journey to the central district an option affordable to middle-class professionals; a variety of lower-status work possibilities in the area, including some industry, brought an influx of solidly working-class residents as well. An 1883 article highlighting a prominent North Philadelphia educational institution, the Wagner Free Institute of Science constructed between 1859 and 1865, noted the changes in the area.

> Gradually the old landmarks began to disappear as the population and enterprise of Philadelphia increased…There are thousands of…houses now being built by persons in this neighborhood. The convenience offered by the street cars, the healthy atmosphere and the general neatness of the new houses combine to make the neighborhood agreeable and pleasant. Buildings are going up on Fifteenth, Sixteenth, Seventeenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth streets, and on Montgomery avenue, Berks, Diamond, Norris and other streets.[14]

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[13]E. Digby Baltzell, *Philadelphia Gentlemen: The Making of a National Upper Class* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958); George E. Thomas, "Architectural Patronage and Social Stratification in Philadelphia between 1840 and 1920," *The Divided Metropolis: Social and Spatial Dimensions of Philadelphia, 1800–1975*, eds. William W. Cutler and Howard Gillette (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980) 85–123.

[14]"Improvements…," 18 Aug. 1883.

By late in the 1880s, the frontage along another premier east-west thoroughfare—Diamond Street—in the blocks immediately west of Broad became lined with both staid and eclectically-styled rows. By 1892, when the first stones of the George W. South Memorial Church of the Advocate—an unparalleled landmark of French gothic ecclesiastical design—were being laid, its Diamond Street site was surrounded in all directions by blocks upon blocks of attached urban dwellings.[15]

Not surprisingly, the blocks furthest west from Broad Street along the final approach to Fairmount Park were among the last to be developed. This generally slow westward development along east-west thoroughfares stemmed from two major obstacles—topography and industry. Diamond Street did not extend all the way to the park until 1886, after a massive cemetery relocation and grading project undertaken by developer William M. Singerly.

> The actual opening of Diamond Street thru (sic) Odd Fellows Cemetery, and the removal of fences that crossed this line, signalized the completion of the most extensive improvement ever projected in this city. Thus far…he has raised the grade of nearly two miles of streets…Persons who are unfamiliar with the locality as it was prior to the completion of these improvements can only have a faint conception of the transformation that has occurred there.[16]

In addition to the need for filling and grading, a degree of industry, though much more modest when compared to that elsewhere in the city, stymied development—particularly upper-end housing—furthest west. A great deal of North Philadelphia real estate west of Broad bordered on Brewerytown, a neighborhood of industrial operations and noxious smells and processes connected to the beer-making business. Brewerytown stretched from Thirtieth to Thirty-second Streets between Girard and Glenwood Avenues; factory owners wedged housing in the small streets between the main thoroughfares dedicated to manufacturing and service buildings.[17] In the end, however, the amenities offered by Fairmount Park ultimately negated the detrimental effects of living in proximity to industry. Solidly blue-collar and small proprietor families headed by firemen, coopers, bartenders, butchers, grocers, and boardinghouse keepers had wended their way as far as Thirty-second and Thompson Streets by 1900. Streetcar lines provided the means for downtown pleasure seekers to reach the park, and for residents in areas bordering the park to commute to center city.[18] By 1910, Thirty-third Street along the park was completely developed and the area

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[15]G. M. Hopkins, *City Atlas of Philadelphia by Wards* (Philadelphia, 1875); George W. and Walter S. Bromley, *Atlas of the City of Philadelphia*, volume 6 (Philadelphia, 1888); Ernest Hexamer, *Insurance Maps of the City of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1892; revised 1893–1895).

[16]*Philadelphia Real Estate Record & Builders' Guide* 1:24 (21 Jun. 1886): 279.

[17]George E. Thomas, "National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, Brewerytown Historic District," Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 17 May 1990, revised 4 Sep. 1990.

[18]U.S. Census of Population, 1900, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Enumeration District 738; Nathaniel Burt and Wallace E. Davies, "The Iron Age. 1876–1905," *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History*, ed. Russell F. Weigley (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982) 483–485.

between Broad Street and Fairmount Park was completely filled with houses, churches, schools, and businesses for scores of blocks northward from the city center.

As the final stages of development fully filled North Philadelphia blocks, the area was already going through pronounced demographic shifts. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the "graying" of many blocks proved key to their wholesale turnover to other groups. As elite Protestant homeowners of the first generation died, their descendants sold the properties and established residences in the Main Line suburbs. In the first major demographic shift in the 1920s, the two principal sorts of purchasers were organizations and upper-class Jewish families. The organizations largely took over the expansive and impractical Victorian mansions, while Jewish families and their associated social groups and congregations purchased both private residences and former churches.

Close on the heels of Protestant white middle and upper class migration out of the area was the flight of the white working class. Prohibition and the Great Depression devastated the Brewerytown economy in the 1920s and 1930s and the de-industrialization of Philadelphia in the 1940s and 1950s further constricted the local employment base. The Brewerytown neighborhood, historically teetering between industrial and residential uses, became fully undesirable to white residents at this time and they moved to other areas of the city or to the expanding suburbs. Additionally, large houses were increasingly divided into multiple units and drew a slightly less affluent clientele to the streets.

By the still-segregated 1950s, the social composition of the vicinity had shifted once again; the majority of Christian and Jewish white residents had left and North Philadelphia became the one of the centers of the city's African-American population. Beginning in the mid-1920s, African Americans, in search of employment and drawn to the urban north from the rural south in the wake of agricultural depression, migrated to Philadelphia in large numbers—a great many ultimately settling in North Philadelphia. Not long after, desegregation and the expansion of the black middle class in the 1960s and 1970s led to a progressive emptying out of the area by those who could afford to leave. North Philadelphia remains an African-American enclave, and recent redevelopment efforts are aimed at reducing continued flight of residents out of the area, offsetting high vacancy rates, and shoring-up continued deterioration of the housing stock.

1500 BLOCK, N. SEVENTEENTH STREET

The *Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builder's Guide* noted in its April 12, 1886 issue that business partners Peter A. B. Widener and William L. Elkins—among the most prominent of Philadelphia's Gilded Age *nouveaux riches*—were going to construct twenty-nine houses at Seventeenth and Jefferson, and Bouvier Streets (a half block west of Seventeenth)—the 1500 block was part of this commission. With a fortune based in streetcar development, Widener and Elkins soon turned their sights to real estate development in North Philadelphia. Perhaps on account of their *arriviste* status—both were looked down upon by the Philadelphia blue bloods cloistered around Rittenhouse Square in Center City—or to insure the success of their residential speculation in the area, Widener and Elkins constructed grand mansions on N. Broad Street at Girard Avenue in the mid-1880s.[19]

[19]Michael J. Lewis, " 'He was not a Connoisseur': Peter Widener and his House," *Nineteenth Century* 12:3/4 (1993): 28–30.

For their venture on N. Seventeenth Street—and indeed for a great many of their speculative and personal commissions—the pair turned to Willis G. Hale. Hale rose in importance as a prolific Philadelphia architect in the years after the Civil War. His over-the-top designs soon became well-known, and under the aegis of Elkins and Widener, he became a major player in upscale North Philadelphia residential design. "Hale's genius was to take…essentially identical rowhouses, with their mass produced industrial parts and lathe-turned woodwork, and to make them distinctive."[20] His ebullient facades often contrasted sculpture, tile, inventive brick and stone work, in true high-Victorian form. The 1500 block of Seventeenth Street clearly shows Hale's inventiveness, unfortunately these grand designs—and the neighborhood in which they were constructed—went out of favor quickly, ultimately reaching their present deteriorated state.

> The rows of North Philadelphia were built at the outer limits of fashion, and like everything a la mode, they went out of fashion just as quickly. Probably that factor was at the root of North Philadelphia's impermanence. In building so fashion-conscious a neighborhood, the residents of North Philadelphia doomed themselves to move on as soon as it became dated.[21]

The row was completed by December 1886 when the house at 1500 N. Seventeenth Street was sold to Mary C. Butterworth.[22] On 16 May 1894 the property was sold to Joseph W. Thorn under whose ownership it became involved with a bankruptcy case related to the failure of the Joseph Thorn & Company. By late in the 1920s, evidenced solely by named owners in the transfer file, it appears that—like many of the properties west of Broad in this vicinity of North Philadelphia—the property came under the ownership of a Jewish couple, Isaac and Rose Weinstein.

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[20]Ibid., 28.

[21]Thomas, "Architectural Patronage," 114.

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HISTORIAN: James A. Jacobs, Summer 2000.

PROJECT INFORMATION:

The documentation of 1500 Block, N. Seventeenth Street was undertaken during the summer of 2000 as part of a larger program to record historic landmarks and historically significant structures in North Philadelphia. The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), E. Blaine Cliver, Chief of HABS/HAER, and Paul D. Dolinsky, Chief of HABS; funding was made possible through a congressional appropriation for documentation in Southeastern Pennsylvania and supplemented by a William Penn Foundation grant to the Foundation for Architecture for educational purposes. The project was planned and administered by HABS historian Catherine C. Lavoie and HABS architect Robert R. Arzola. The project historian was James A. Jacobs (George Washington University). Large format photography was undertaken by Joseph Elliott.